ACL IN 1977

Paul G. Chapin
National Science Foundation
1800 G St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20550

As I leaf through my own "ACL (Historical)" file (which, I am frightened to observe, goes back to the Fourth Annual Meeting, in 1966), and focus in particular on 1977, when I was President, it strikes me that pretty much everything significant that happened in the Association that year was the work of other people. Don Walker was completing the mammoth task of transferring all of the ACL's records from the East Coast to the West, paying off our indebtedness to the Center for Applied Linguistics, and in general getting the Association onto the firm financial and organizational footing which it has enjoyed to this day. Dave Hays was seeing to it that the microfiche journal kept on coming, and George Heidorn joined him as Associate Editor that year to begin the move toward hard copy publication. That was the year when we hitched up our organizational pants and moved our Annual Meeting back to the Spring, after some years when it had been in the Fall. Jonathan Allen and his Program Committee coped admirably with the challenge of putting on an Annual Meeting program less than six months after the last one. The culinary staff at the Foundry Restaurant in Georgetown provided a banquet that I still remember as delicious.

AFIPS weighed in in a less constructive fashion with their demand that we enroll a membership of 1500 by a certain time (1982, I think) to retain our status as full-fledged members, which would require tripling our membership (maybe we'll make it yet--who knows?). They were also responsible for one of the non-events of the decade, the abortive founding of abacus, which was to be the Scientific American of computing. We pledged $5,000 to the start-up costs on that, payable on request, but they never got far enough to make the request.

What of the field? The program for the 1977 Annual Meeting shows names which are mostly still familiar to all of us, speaking on topics which would not be out of place at the 1982 Annual Meeting. I take this as a sign not of stagnation, but of persevering people working on problems of enormous complexity.

One event of 1977 may end up having more impact on our field than anything the ACL did that year. That was the year that the Sloan Foundation made the first grants in its Particular Program in Cognitive Science. It will be a long time before we know all of the results of the ferment that Program created, but it is already abundantly clear that one result has been a massive increase in the interested attention of theoretical linguists to computational linguistics. This is going to be beneficial to both fields, but especially so, I think to computational linguistics, by keeping our attention fixed on problems far larger than making the program work.